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ABSTRACT

Recent research has invited critiques of the authoritative descriptions of composing found in many rhetoric textbooks. The concept of "convention" may be especially useful in rethinking the teleological basis of these textbook descriptions. Conventions found in composition textbooks need to be unmasked as arbitrary concepts which serve to perpetuate the decisions of others and to impose a linear order upon what is necessarily a chaotic process. The authority of printed textbooks coupled with the inclination of many students to reduce the complexity of writing tasks may outstrip some composition teachers' recent efforts to qualify textbook conventions and to encourage a more critical perspective. While the distinctions of invention, writing, and revising should be preserved, English teachers need to re-examine their attitudes toward these distinctions and how to best teach students to appreciate them. Instead of using clusters, Pentads, and brainstorming lists, a writer could begin with pleasure reading, physical exercise or dreaming. Requiring students to proceed with composition in conventional ways excuses them from the requirement to judge the contextual appropriateness of composing conventions and from inventing their own strategies for writing. (Two pages of references are attached.) (MHC)

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Decomposing Composing Conventions[1]

In recent years, it has become evident that research articulating writing process assumptions has invited criticism and speculation about many of the implications buried within authoritative descriptions of composing. We now look to revisionist critiques to reveal theoretical weaknesses of the process framework, and some of these critiques even remind us of what is lost by forsaking our traditional focus on written products. Louise Wetherbee Phelps, for instance, has noticed the difficulty of handling textual issues -- issues of style and discourse form, for example -- within the process framework (12); she calls for a more integrative approach, keying this to an analysis of the static and dynamic means by which readers and writers jointly produce textual coherence (21). Kenneth Bruffee takes a different tack, arguing that social constructionism -- the idea that all knowledge is a social, not an individual, construct -- offers a fruitful alternative to the way in which we normally think and talk about what we do as English teachers (775). Bruffee's constructionist point of view eventually leads him to characterize differences between cognitive process and social constructivist work in composition: the former says that language has a social context; the latter says that language is a social construct (785). Marilyn Cooper makes a similar point, that cognitive process models of writing seem to project an ideal

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image, that of the solitary author, isolated from the social world (365). She calls for an ecological model that would describe the various social systems through which writers interact with other minds, inhabitants of "a landscape that is always being modified by ongoing human discourse" (372).

Integrative-cum-social-cum-ecological critiques such as these don't reject process frameworks so much as adjust them to a prevailing intellectual climate, a Weltanschauung -- no doubt influenced by post-structuralist skepticism -- inviting us to reject the absolute to speculate about the contextual, indeed realize that within the inexhaustible context of particular discourse situations writers and readers evaluate their ideas, reject and emend strategies, imagine the forms of their products, shift their attitudes, and redefine their problems. Contextualist critiques help to fulfill the rhetorical potential that has always been immanent within Maxine Hairston's tentative paradigm description and lend to composition studies a new measure of theoretical coherence. In this essay I wish to extend these critiques, first by offering an analysis of the concept of social convention, and second by using that concept as a heuristic by which I mean to show the arbitrary character of the composing process descriptions often found in recently published rhetoric textbooks, the source for many students -- and teachers? -- of what they believe about the writing process.

The use of the term convention may be most familiar to composition specialists at home in the realms of literary criticism and language philosophy, realms where conventions have

long been recognized as important means by which to explain some aspects of the social dimension of language. Literary critic Jonathan Culler, for instance, defines his idea of literary competence "as a set of conventions for reading literary texts" (118), and language philosopher H.P. Grice has depended upon the concept of convention to link utterance and meaning and to serve as a rational basis from which language users calculate implicatures ("Logic and Conversation" 50).[2] Unfortunately, theorists who depend upon the concept of social convention often leave that concept unanalyzed, perhaps because it seems so well understood as to make pointless rigorous definition. But at least one literary critic, Charles Eric Reeves, believes that such is not the case. Reeves decries the use of the term by literary critics who often seem unaware that most construals of convention define them as arbitrary regularities. He asks whether it makes sense to speak of the arbitrary in literature, since "many influential versions of the literary insist on its purposiveness, its total teleological coherence" (799). Reeves' point, it seems to me, generalizes to extra-literary discourse as well, for all discourse may be understood in terms of its function, which also circumscribes formal design.

Reeve's critique is meant to show how conventions are often of dubious use for explaining some aspects of literary discourse hitherto accepted as conventional by many critics -- that is, as long as social "convention" is meant to have broad significance beyond the exclusive domain of literary studies. What is needed, then, is a precise analysis of the term, not only, as Reeves puts

it, "to force a certain conceptual clarity in poetics" (798), but also to force conceptual clarity in other domains wherein social conventions play a role, including, perhaps, the domain of composition. Fortunately, such an analysis can be found in the work of David Lewis, a language philosopher who has worked out and according to subsequent critiques emended a carefully constructed analysis of the term.

In his book Convention: a Philosophical Study and in an essay entitled "Languages and Language," Lewis draws eclectically from different fields to formulate his definition of convention, which is highly technical, ominously formalistic, and perhaps invaluable --because it provides clear criteria by which to judge the conventional or non-conventional qualities of social regularities. Lewis grounds his definition in an analysis of game logic, specifically coordination problems wherein players seek to coordinate their actions with each other while ensuring themselves of the greatest mutual gain. Lewis gives a number of examples of conventions arguably similar to the solutions to coordination problems, allowing him to develop a highly abstract but admirably specific definition. According to Lewis, a convention is ...

> a regularity R, in action or in action and belief, in a population P if and only if, within P, the following six conditions hold. (Or at least they almost hold. A few exceptions to the "everyone"s can be tolerated.)
> (1) Everyone conforms to R.

> (2) Everyone believes that the others conform to R.
>
> (3) This belief that the others conform to R gives everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to R himself ....
>
> (4) There is general preference for general conformity to R rather than slightly-less-than-general conformity.
>
> (5) R is not the only possible regularity meeting the last two conditions. There is at least one alternative R' so that the belief that the others conformed to R' would give everyone...reason to conform to R'.
>
> (6) Finally, the various facts listed in conditions (1) to (5) are matters of common (or mutual) knowledge. ("Languages and Language" 5-6).

In its formalistic way, this definition nicely highlights an easily forgotten aspect of conventions, their fundamental arbitrariness. But I would also emphasize another aspect of Lewis' definition: that it reveals how conventions are based on evaluative acts, for his definition implies that alternatives to conventions are always limited by the situational interests of the original participants who develop conventions in response to specific social needs and adhere to them because of their continuing social utility. Conventions are therefore arbitrary in that there are always alternatives, but the range of possible alternatives is demarcated by the interests of participants. From these two points an important paradox emerges: conventions are context sensitive because they remain in force only so long

as most everyone within a population deems them valuable. But so far as their original arbitrary nature remains hidden, masked by their apparent utility within different situations, conventions are insensitive to context because exploiting them does not require users to explore alternatives that may serve as well, perhaps better, within a particular situation. Conventions, then, are especially useful because once they gain social acceptance, they represent traditional regularities which within their scope obviate the need for ad hoc evaluative decisions by their users, once users consciously or unconsciously elect to conform to their constraints. As a result, conventions may not appear arbitrary at all: social force and the fact that they represent powerful traditional agreements mask possible alternatives.

Perhaps a familiar example will serve to make these abstract explanations a little more concrete. In his Course in General Linguistics, Saussure reveals the arbitrary nature of the sign. Speaking of the association of the French signifier soeur (for Saussure a "sound-image") and the signified concept of "sister," he concludes that there is no inner relationship by which to coordinate the two (67). Many other signifiers could do as well to signify that concept if only speakers of French would come to use them. But the utility of the convention -- the association of soeur with the concept of "sister" -- is so obviously useful for speakers of French, no one thinks to question its nature and it becomes easy to accept the sound as a natural and necessary way to signify the concept.

We can see that within the domains of linguistics, language philosophy, and literary criticism, the concept of convention has hitherto played a substantive role in the explicit formulation of language theory. Not so in the domain of composition theory and pedagogy, where the concept is virtually ignored except insofar as composition theorists borrow from other disciplines. Nonetheless, I believe the concept is useful for composition specialists, because the qualities by which we recognize conventions -- their arbitrariness and their ability to preserve traditional agreements -- can be used heuristically to pose questions about composition theory and pedagogy and may be especially useful for rethinking the teleological basis of some descriptions of the writing process, specifically those descriptions offered to students through the familiar medium of their composition textbooks.

Teachers embracing process approaches to composition pedagogy often rely on these composition textbooks -- by dint of personal choice or institutional decree -- to teach students about the idiosyncratic, recursive nature of writing and those strategies of invention and revision by which writing often proceeds. But in a well-known analysis of first generation process textbooks, Mike Rose has pointed out that these writing texts -- despite theoretical sophistication revealing a clear awareness of the elusiveness of writing processes -- surprisingly offered unqualified restrictive statements about the composing process or the written product. Among the ten examples that Rose picks out are such dicta as: "If you can't list at least six

points (for any topic) then select another topic"; "You will need to make at least two drafts before submitting any paper"; and "Do not inject a new idea into your concluding paragraph",(66). Rose calls these dicta "rules." I would point out that they are also conventions -- the terms, according to Lewis, are not mutually exclusive (Convention 100-107) -- to the extent that there seems no motivation for preferring their advice to alternatives and to the extent they derive their regulative force from expectations about social conformity.

Of course, such advice is not bad in and of itself: student writers benefit from such dicta whenever they are appropriate to the composing situations in which they find themselves, and this may be most of the time. But whenever students follow advice merely because it seems conventional, we can now appreciate they may also neglect to evaluate the full dynamics of the rhetorical context -- including how to adjust textual form to their shifting personal intentions, the expectations of audiences, and the social dynamics underpinning written discourse -- because conventions serve to perpetuate the evaluative decisions of others. If this is the case, then how can we expect students to design cohesive -- if not compelling -- texts whenever the rhetorical situation makes the use of such conventions inappropriate?

The apparent conventional nature of such dicta is fortunately a small concern, for the obvious limitations of the advice are most often recognized by composition teachers who qualify it constantly. Yet the authority of printed textbooks

coupled with the natural inclination of many students to reduce the complexity of writing tasks may sometimes outstrip the ability of teachers to coax students into a more critical perspective. But so far as we already recognize these problems, we can plan ways to solve them. Perhaps, as Mike Rose suggests, by adopting texts for teachers instead of students, texts which would help teachers learn how to evaluate the particular needs of students and assign them work appropriate to their individual needs (73). But for now, many composition students and teachers depend upon textbooks more or less designed to help students, and within some of these texts -- as well as within the process frame in which most are theoretically grounded -- lurks another problem (one not so easily recognized and not so easily addressed), the conventional descriptions many textbooks offer of the writing process.

For instance, process texts -- and here I am speaking of second, even third generation rhetorics -- often strive to explain in one way or another our tentative understanding of writing processes. An examination of almost any one of these textbooks[3] reveals general fidelity to a description of composing differing little from that which emerged in the work of D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke: the process begins with explanations of prewriting (or invention, or in one case "pre-thinking"), then moves through discussions of writing, revising, and editing. Many process-oriented books are fine texts, sensitively written with much to recommend them. Most of them include explanations of composing designed to complicate the stage descriptions

they adopt for pedagogy, so that students and teachers are cautioned that research confirms our intuitions that writing is a recursive process, that the stages (or phases) are simplifications for analysis, and that invention, writing, revising, and editing may occur anywhere in the process, at any level of discourse, and for any number of reasons. As one textbook explains it,

> The mind is a messy thing; it will leap from note-taking to paragraph writing to outlining to rewriting. While you're writing page seven, it will be rewriting page five and thinking up great lines for page ten or for another essay. You must let your brain go about its messy business. The writer's rule is take what comes, whenever it comes. (author's italics, Rawlins 41)

In spite of such explanations, these textbooks by their nature impose a linear order upon a chaotic process, and to be fair, many textbook authors are forthright about the problem: the writer cited above warns his readers that the writing process is not as neat as the sequence of chapters makes it seem (41). But the linear nature of textbooks reinforced by the relentless logic of process (dictating that some order of events is necessary to achieve over-arching goals) lends such treatments of composing an intuitive verisimilitude, for how else could writers begin other than by prewriting, and without having written, how could writers revise and edit their work? If not wholly satisfactory --

because of their sequential nature -- textbook treatments of composing, then, do not seem conventional, because they do not seem wholly arbitrary, especially when they are given support in the form of case studies of how student writers are motivated to exploit familiar prewriting, writing, and revising strategies in order to create successful essays.[4]

But ecological and social critiques of process descriptions -- especially those directed toward sophisticated, cognitive models of process -- remind us of the dynamic, social dimension of language, remind us that we are always surrounded by discourse communities, that in a sense we are always composing and shifting discourse goals. Thus the typical textbook description of composing fails us: not because -- caveats aside -- it inevitably fails to capture the recursive nature of composing, but because it sets artificial boundaries to the process -- invention and revision or editing -- that do seem wholly conventional, thus arbitrary. For when writers explore topics, contextualist critics seem to say that writers are also exploring goals, attitudes, knowledge already and always forming within the discourse communities they inhabit; likely they will draw upon, discourse, written or spoken texts, bearing upon their current goals. These texts, however they are read or remembered, serve just as well as candidates for revision as do texts that appear later in the writing process, a point that parallels nicely the observation of one particularly good textbook, that writers have often developed special strategies for adding to their reserves of material and keeping themselves well prepared to write

(Hairston, Contemporary Composition 40). In fact, I am suggesting that ecological or social models of language imply that the composing process has no necessary boundaries except those which we assign to it for purposes of analysis or explanation. Assigning activities such as brainstorming or clustering to the "beginning" of the writing process (the "prewriting" phase) do not so much delimit the beginning of the process as give us a conventional means -- since only tradition dictates that these activities are inaugural -- by which to understand one of its parts. On this analysis, invention looks suspiciously like revision, since prewriting activities not only "discover" matter for compositions but translate it into some more usable and more valuable form, an inscribed text. Writing and editing may be seen as processes that substantially accomplish the same thing. Reconceiving the writing process along these lines questions the nature of those textual forms which writers create throughout their composing and reminds us that conventional descriptions of composing derive their force from implicit social agreements that could just as well be otherwise.

Still, I don't want to suggest we abandon the idea that there are distinctions among what we call invention, writing, and revising: we need these distinctions to preserve our understanding of the differences in the commitments and attitudes writers develop toward the forms they create, for if nothing else these distinctions imply differences in the felt sense writers have about the adequacy of emerging texts, feelings about how

well they fulfill over-arching composing goals. I do want to suggest, however, we re-examine our attitudes toward these distinctions and ask how we can best teach our students to appreciate them.

For one thing, we can see that process descriptions of composing lead us to recognize invention, writing, and revising by means of a relatively narrow range of textual indices conventionally associated with each stage: clusters, Pentads, and brainstorming lists typically tell of invention; extended series of initial to final drafts tell of writing, revising, and editing. But there is nothing inevitable about the appearance of any one of these texts to the successful process of writing: within variable limits the inaugural inscription of any single text -- however small or large -- may represent the culmination of a complex, idiosyncratic cognitive and social process for which no other sharable textual indices are drafted. Clusters, Pentads, brainstorming lists, and so on are merely a few of the most conventional means by which we recognize the nuances of a writer's process. Unfortunately, their conventional prominence may preclude us from recognizing legitimate alternatives and/or adjuncts, including such unbounded activities like pleasure reading, physical exercise, and (with apologies to Samual Taylor Coleridge) dreaming.

If nothing else, then, teachers might reconsider the force with which they urge students to embrace heuristics or to revise particular drafts. For while such activities are often valuable for students, they need not be: the heuristics we teach are only

a small set of possible inventive activities and the requirement to revise an already good draft may seem redundant to a writer for whom every sentence has evolved slowly through many painful lives. In short, asking students to produce the conventional indices by which we often recognize the successful writing process -- clusters, Pentads, outlines, drafts, and so on -- will often be exactly what most students need, though not for every occasion and certainly not for every student. For requiring students to proceed in these conventional (read traditional) ways technically excuses them from the requirement of sizing up the writing context to some degree on their own, from the requirement to judge the contextual appropriateness of composing conventions, and from the requirement to invent more or less idiosyncratic strategies for writing. I realize, of course, that many (most?) students will in some manner do all this anyway: student writers are rarely so naive as to adhere point for point to any description of successful composing, whether offered by teacher or textbook. Often the disparity is not so much what students will do, but what teachers require and therefore expect of them.

Exploiting David Lewis' analysis of convention doesn't lead to wholly new revelations about our traditional textbook descriptions of composing. I would maintain, however, that coupled with the insights of contextualist critiques of process frameworks, it lends a new theoretical coherence to our understanding of the flaws within these descriptions, for instance their focus on seemingly inevitable activities within the composing process and their seemingly inevitable boundaries.

We can now appreciate in a different way that these descriptions are not nearly so daunting as they seem, for despite their intuitive verisimilitude, there is much within these descriptions of writing that could just as well be otherwise, given a will to change. We are lucky that social and ecological critiques of process theory and pedagogy urge a more critical attitude and offer a more fruitful ground from which to question the situational utility of hitherto unexamined conventions, whether of form or procedure. And perhaps pedagogy emerging from social models will encourage students to become more skeptical too, skeptical about embracing composing conventions merely because they have been useful at one time or another. But I hope teaching students to unmask arbitrary dicta will not teach them to reject them out of hand, for many (perhaps most) conventions will always remain valuable to readers and writers no matter what the discourse situation, especially conventions of sincerity, ethical commitment, and taste.

Notes

[1]An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the 1987 4C's in Atlanta, Georgia. The author wishes to thank Judith Rodby and Simone Billings for helpful comments they made on earlier drafts.

[2]In a more recent discussion, Grice argues for a more limited role for the role of convention in fixing what sentences mean. His suggestion is to say that what a word means in a language is in general what is optimal for speakers of that language to do with that word, or what use they are to make of it ("Meaning Revisited" 239).

[3]For the purposes of this essay, I examined ten textbooks that in one way or another embrace process assumptions. I have limited specific citations in my essay only to those textbooks that seemed to me to offer particulary level-headed descriptions of composing, and whatever criticisms I offer are meant to reflect not so much on particular textbooks or their authors but on the inevitable problems of handling the delicate issues of writing processes within the textbook genre. For full citations of the other textbooks I examined, see the list of works consulted below.

[4]For texts that include particularly good case studies of student writers' composing processes, see X.J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy, The Bedford Guide for College Writers, and Linda Flower, Problem Solving Strategies for Writing.

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